You the People: American National Identity in Presidential Rhetoric by Vanessa B. Beasley
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# BOOK REVIEWS

***You the People: American National Identity in Presidential Rhetoric.*** By Vanessa B. Beasley. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2004. 204 pp.

In recent years, scholars have devoted increasing attention to the study of presidential speechmaking and rhetoric. This is in part due to the fact that presidents since at least Teddy Roosevelt have taken on a much more public role, but also because presidential speeches provide easily observable sources of data from a mostly opaque institution. Vanessa B. Beasley's *You the People*, a recent addition to this literature, takes a very different approach than other recent studies of presidential speechmaking. Readers will find that this book fits more comfortably within rhetorical studies, particularly those from a critical theory perspective, rather than quantitatively focused presidential studies in political science.

Beasley's main goal is to explore the way presidents since 1885 have used rhetorical constructions to define exactly what it means to be an American. Notably, she examines presidential rhetoric to ask whether chief executives define American citizenship as simply a matter of legal status or geographical placement, or whether they suggest the need for a deeper commitment to shared ideals. Thus, the book nicely complements volumes such as Michael Lind's *The Next American Nation* and Robert Bellah's seminal works. Most of the past literature on this topic has tended to accept the view that Americans are bound together by a shared commitment to particular ideals—liberty, equality, individualism, and so forth. While most other studies have sought to identify and delineate the boundaries of these shared ideals, Beasley instead asks a deeper question: how are these ideals collectively constructed? So instead of describing the values themselves, she wants to explore "how and why they come into being, how they are defined and understood, and how they thus constitute the 'knowledge culture' that is assumed to accompany American national identity" (p. 45). Specifically, she asks us to consider the role presidents have played in this process.

After laying out her general framework, Beasley applies it in separate chapters to the specific areas of immigration, race, and gender. Overall, she argues that presidents have downplayed Americans' diversity by adopting a civil religious rhetoric focused on a national unity of shared principles. When discussing immigrants, for example, presidents have tended to use language that suggests newcomers are not really American until they develop proper attitudes, a process that can extend over multiple generations. Similarly, Native and African Americans have been discussed by presidents in such a way as to suggest they need government assistance and reeducation to properly learn core American principles. Finally, Beasley argues that presidents have carefully—in fact, often simultaneously—placed women both within and outside their definition of the American citizenry. On these points, *You the People* ties in well with other recent works. For instance, the notion that the discourse of American politics tends to create boundaries


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between "us" and "them" is explored convincingly in James Morone's *Hellfire Nation*. Beasley usefully applies this type of analysis to presidential rhetoric. Also, in noting that presidential rhetoric tends to become more inclusive toward previously excluded groups during periods of national crisis, this book dovetails with Philip Klinkner's recent book, *The Unsteady March*, which shows how progress in civil rights in the United States has tended to come in spurts during such periods.

For these reasons *You the People* will be of greatest interest for scholars and students of rhetoric and American cultural history. It would make a good addition to upper level courses in rhetoric, political culture, or American studies. It may be of less interest, however, for those in traditional presidency courses in political science, especially those with a more quantitative focus. Many political scientists will have serious concerns about Beasley's methodological approach that "investigates presidential rhetoric qualitatively by using a historical-critical lens to trace its major constitutive themes regarding American nationalism" (p. 18). In dealing with the book's main substantive examples of immigration, race, and gender, Beasley's narrative includes numerous illustrative quotes from presidential speeches that support her main argument. Although she has attempted to provide a representative sample of presidential speeches, the lack of a specific method for doing so raises some serious concerns. Empiricists will certainly wish for greater assurances that the quotes are representative. Ultimately, we are left to wonder whether there are disconfirming quotes that have been excluded from the discussion. As such, this book diverges sharply from quantitative studies of presidential rhetoric such as *The Sound of Leadership*, written by Beasley's mentor, Roderick Hart.

Presidency scholars also may have questions about Beasley's conclusions as they relate to presidency studies. Finding that presidents across a wide swath of time and contexts have tended to adopt similar rhetoric, she concludes "presidents are constrained not only by material and political factors, but also by cultural, symbolic, and rhetorical ones" (p. 154). Although possibly true, the similarity in presidents' rhetoric does not in itself prove that presidents are constrained. The notion of constraint necessarily implies that some presidents would have preferred to speak differently but felt unable to do so. No evidence is ever presented that this is the case. Perhaps American voters tend to elect presidents with certain shared worldviews. Moreover, the book's final chapter, which shows how Bill Clinton's rhetoric often diverged from his predecessors', seems to undercut this larger argument. At a minimum, I would have preferred to see a more detailed theoretical framework that explained the relationship between presidential rhetoric and the factors believed to influence it. The fact that presidential rhetoric has been largely constant over time does not in itself justify the conclusion that "presidents do not have unlimited rhetorical options" (p. 156).

Overall, *You the People* is a well-written book that will contribute to several academic fields, especially rhetoric and American studies. Even if it does not always answer them with certainty, it asks a series of novel and interesting questions. Readers will find some fascinating examples of how American presidents have rhetorically expounded upon some of the most critical cultural issues in U.S. history.

—Richard J. Powell
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